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# GREAT STORIES OF ALL NATIONS

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*One Hundred Sixty Complete Short  
Stories from the Literatures of All  
Periods and Countries*

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## LATIN AMERICA

### BRAZIL

#### MONTEIRO LOBATO

(1883- )

MONTEIRO LOBATO was born in the environs of São Paulo, Brazil. He comes to writing through the accident of having written a vigorous letter in denunciation of the practice of clearing fields by fire; it was such an original document that it was featured on the first page of an important daily. Since then Lobato has become a leader in the new Brazilian literature. He has helped to shake native letters free of the strong French influence that was denationalising it, and has taken his characters and his style from his native land. He is the author of many short tales, edits the important review, *Revista do Brasil*, and heads a large publishing house that encourages Brazilian talent. *O Comprador de fazendas* comes from his collection, *Urupês. Brazilian Literature*, by Isaac Goldberg (A. A. Knopf, New York, 1922) has a special chapter on Lobato, pages 277-291.

#### THE FARM MAGNATE \*

**A** WORSE farm than the Corn Stalk estate didn't exist. It had already ruined three owners, so that malicious gossip whispered: "It's a stalk, all right." Its latest proprietor, a certain David Moreira de Souza, had acquired it on the instalment plan, convinced that it was a bonanza; but there he was, too, dragging along under the burden of debt, scratching his head in despair.

The coffee-trees would be bare as sticks, year in, year out, either lashed by the hail or blighted by terrible frosts, and their yield never filled a good-sized basket.

The pasture grounds, sterile, and pasture indeed to all manner of plagues, were the camping ground of destructive ants who shared the field with deadly weeds, swarming with lice. Any beast that set foot there was soon a framework of ribs covered with vermin, a most pitiful sight to see.

\* This authorised version was printed originally in *World Fiction*, January, 1923. (The magazine is extinct.) It now appears with revisions.



The underbrush which here replaced the native forests revealed, through the sparsity of the wild cane, the most exhausted of dry soil. On such soil as this the manioc waved thin little knotty branches, the sugar-cane grew no thicker than a reed, producing cane so wizened that they passed whole through the mill.

The horses were covered with lice. The pigs that escaped the pest competed in thinness with the cows of Pharaoh's dreams.

On every side the cutting-ant, day and night, mowed down the grass of the pasture-lands, so that in October the sky was clouded by winged ants at their aerial love-making.

The roads were left half laid, fences on the ground, farm-hands' quarters with shaky, leaky roofs—the prophecy of ugly rooms beneath. Even upon the manor-house the general decay had laid its hand, loosening sections of plaster, rotting the floors. Windows without panes, loose-jointed furniture, cracked walls. . . . It is doubtful that there was anything whole in the place.

Within this crumbling frame the owner, rendered prematurely old by his successive disappointments, and gnawed, moreover, by the voracious canker-worm of the recurring payments, would scratch the top of his grey head a hundred times a day.

His wife, poor Donna Izaura, with the strength of her maturity gone, had accumulated in her face all the spots and crow's feet that are the product of years of hard toil.

Zico, their eldest, had turned out a good-for-nothing, fond of rising at ten, primping until eleven, and spending the rest of the day in unsuccessful love-affairs.

In addition to this idler they had Zilda, then about eighteen—a nice enough girl, but sentimental beyond all reason and parental peace of mind. All she did was read love stories and build castles in the air.

The one way out of this situation was to sell the accursed farm. It was difficult, however, to get hold of a big enough fool. Several prospective purchasers had already been decoyed there by artful advertisements; but they all turned up their noses scornfully and had not deigned to make an offer.

"I wouldn't have it as a gift," they grumbled to themselves.

Moreira's dizzy brain, after so much diligent scratching, suggested a wily plan: to set plants from the rich neighbouring soil in the fringes of the thickets and one or two of the other places where visitors might look. The rascal did even more. In a certain hollow he stuck a stick of garlic imported from red earth. And he manured the coffee-trees along the road enough to cover up the decrepitude of the others. Wherever a sunbeam plainly betrayed the sterility of the soil, there the old man would conceal the barrenness under a screen of rich sifted earth.



One day he received a letter from his agent announcing a new prospect. "Play up to this fellow," was the agent's advice, "for he'll fall. His name is Pedro Trancoso, and he's very rich, very young, very talkative, and wants to run a farm for the fun of it. Everything depends on how well you can take him in."

Moreira got ready for the job. First of all he notified all his hands to be at their posts and know what to say. He trained them to answer with consummate skill all the questions that visitors put, in such a way that the barren tracts were transformed into marvels of fertility. Prospective purchasers, inasmuch as they suspect the information furnished them by the proprietor, are in the habit of secretly questioning the help. Here, if this happened, and it always did happen, dialogues of this sort would take place:

"Does it ever freeze here?"

"A mite, and that only in bad years."

"Peas pretty good?"

"Holy Virgin! Only this year I planted five quarts and I gathered fifty bushels. You just ought to see them!"

"Are the cattle troubled with ticks?"

"Bah! One now and then. But there's no better place for breeding. No bad weeds in the pastures. It's a pity the poor owner hasn't the strength he needs, for this would be a model estate!"

The supernumeraries having been trained in their parts, at night, the family discussed the preparations for receiving their guest. The revival of their dying hopes filled everybody with happiness.

"Something tells me that this time the deal will go through," said the good-for-nothing son. And then he announced that he was going to need three *contos de reis* to set himself up in business.

"What business?" asked his father, astonished.

"A store, in Volta Redonda."

"Volta Redonda! I wondered how any sensible idea could find lodging in your windy garret. What are you going to do? Sell Tudinha's people on trust?"

The youth did not blush, but he said nothing; he had his reasons.

The wife wanted a house in the city; for a long time she had had an eye on one, on a certain street—a nice house for people in comfortable circumstances.

Zilda asked for a piano, and crates and more crates of novels.

That night they went to bed happy and early the next day they sent to the city for some delicacies for their guests—butter, cheese, cookies. There was some hesitancy about the butter.

"It's really not worth the trouble," grumbled the wife. "It means three thousand *reis*. I'd rather buy the piece of goods that I need so much with that money."



"We've got to do it, old girl. Sometimes a mere trifle will clinch a bargain. Butter is grease and grease oils the wheels."

The butter won out.

While they were waiting for these things, Donna Izaura got busy with the house, sweeping, dusting and arranging the guest room. She killed the fattest of the bony chickens and a lame little suckling pig. She was making dough for pastry when:

"Here he comes!" shouted Moreira from the window, where he had been posted since early morning, as nervous as he could be, sweeping the road with an old pair of binoculars. Without leaving his observation post he kept transmitting to his busied wife the details that he could make out.

"He's young. . . . Well dressed. . . . Panama hat. . . . He looks like Chico Canhambora. . . ."

At last the guest arrived, dismounted and presented his card. Pedro Trancoso de Carvalhaes Fagundes. Fine appearance. The air of one who has plenty of money. Younger and far more refined than any that had thus far visited the estate.

He told a number of tales with the ease of one who is absolutely at home in the world; he related his trip, the incidents on the way,—a tiny, long-tailed marmoset that he had seen hanging from a branch.

After the two men had gone into the sitting room, Zico, unable to restrain his curiosity, put his ear against the keyhole, from which strategic point he whispered to the women who were busy arranging the table whatever he managed to catch of the conversation. All at once, making a suggestive grimace, he called to his sister in a stage-whisper:

"He's a bachelor, Zilda!"

Without any pretence whatsoever the girl dropped her knives and forks and disappeared. A half an hour later she returned, wearing her best dress, and with two round red spots on her cheeks. Anybody who had gone into the farm chapel then would have noticed the absence of several petals from the red silk paper roses that adorned Saint Anthony, and a lighted candle at the feet of the image.

In the country, rouge and marriages spring alike from the oratory. . . .

Trancoso was going on at great length about various agricultural questions.

"Our native hogs? Pff! A backward stock, and wild to boot. I'm for Poland Chinas. Large Black isn't so bad, either. But the Polands beat them all!"

Moreira, who was innocent of all knowledge in the matter, and familiar with only his own famished pigs, who had neither name nor breed, unconsciously opened his mouth wide with astonishment.

"As far as cattle are concerned," continued Trancoso, "it's my opinion



that all of the authorities, from Barreto to Prado, are dead wrong. I don't believe in either selection or cross-breeding. I'd like to see the finest breeds introduced at once—the Polled Angus, or Red Lincoln. We haven't any pastures, you say? Then let's make them. Let's plant alfalfa. Let's build silos. Assis Brasil once confessed to me . . .”

Assis Brasil! This fellow rubbed elbows with the authorities in agriculture! He was an intimate friend of them all—Prado, Barreto, Contrim. . . . And of ministers, as well! “I've already talked this over with Bezerra. . . .”

Never had the estate been honoured by so distinguished a gentleman—so high up in society and so widely travelled.

He spoke of Argentina and of Chicago as if he had returned from there but yesterday.

Moreira's mouth opened wider and wider until it reached the maximum degree of aperture permitted by the maxillary muscles. At this juncture a timid, feminine voice announced that lunch was ready.

Introductions followed. Zilda was the recipient of compliments such as she had never dreamed of, and they set her heart fluttering. Like praise was meted out to the chicken stew, the *tu'tu*, the pie and even the drinking water.

“Such pure, crystal-clear, absolutely drinkable water, Senhor Moreira, is worth the best of wines. Happy those who may quaff of it!”

The family exchanged glances. Never had it occurred to them that they had anything so precious in the house, and each one unwittingly sipped his liquid as though he were tasting the nectar for the first time. Zico even smacked his lips.

Donna Izaura was beside herself with joy. The eulogy of her cooking had won her heart. That praise more than compensated her for all her trouble.

“There, Zico,” she whispered to her son, “see what an education means. That's what you call refinement!”

After the coffee, which was greeted with a “Delicious!” Senhor Moreira invited the young man for a ride on horseback.

“Impossible, my dear man. I never go riding right after eating. It gives me cephalalgia.”

Zilda blushed. Zilda always blushed when she did not understand a word.

“We'll go out in the afternoon. I'm in no hurry. I'd prefer a nice walk through the apple orchard; it's good for the digestion.”

As the two men sauntered off toward the orchard, Zilda and Zico made a dash for the dictionary.

“It isn't in the S's,” said the boy.

“Try C,” advised the girl.

After some difficulty they found the word.



"Headache—well, what do you think of that! Such a simple thing!"

That afternoon, on their horseback ride, Trancoso admired everything that he laid eyes on, to the great amazement of the farmer, who heard his property praised for the first time.

Prospective purchasers, as a rule, ran down everything and had eyes only for the defects; in front of a hollow they exclaimed upon the dangers of sliding soil; they found the water either bad or insufficient; all they saw when they looked at an ox were the ticks. Not so Trancoso. He praised things to the skies. When they reached the camouflaged spots, and Moreira pointed with a trembling finger to the plants, the youth went into ecstasies.

"The deuce! This is extraordinary!"

It was before the garlic that his amazement reached its climax.

"This is simply marvellous! Never did I imagine that I should find in these parts even the sign of such a plant!" he declared, plucking off a leaf which he put in his notebook as a souvenir.

In the house he took Donna Izaura into his confidence.

"Really, madam, the quality of this land far exceeds my expectations. Even garlic! That's positively astounding!"

Donna Izaura lowered her eyes.

The next scene took place on the veranda.

It was night. A night filled with the chirping of the crickets, the croaking of the frogs, the heavens star-studded and peace lying over all earth.

Trancoso, comfortably ensconced in a rocking-chair, transformed his after-dinner drowsiness into poetic languor.

"This chirping of the crickets—how enchanting! I adore these starry nights, and this bucolic, rustic life—so healthy and happy!"

"But it's very sad," ventured Zilda.

"Do you think so, really? Would you rather have the strident song of the locust in the glaring sunlight?" he asked, mellowing his voice. "It must be that some little cloud casts its shadow over your heart. . . ."

Moreira, seeing that the situation was becoming sentimental, and well aware that it might lead to matrimonial consequences, clapped his hand to his forehead and roared: "The devil! I've forgotten all about . . ." He did not say just what he had forgotten, nor was it necessary. He hurried off, leaving the two alone.

The dialogue continued, with more honey and roses than before.

"You are a poet!" exclaimed Zilda, at one of his tenderest remarks.

"Who is not a poet beneath the stars of heaven and beside a star of the earth?"

"Ah me!" sighed the quivering lass.

Trancoso's bosom, too, heaved a sigh. His eyes rose to a cloud that



resembled the Milky Way, and his lips murmured, as if to himself, one of those commonplaces that conquer maidens:

"Love! . . . The Milky Way of Life! The perfume of roses, the mists of dawn! . . . To love, to listen to the stars. . . . Love ye, for only those who love understand the message of the stars!"

This was mere smugglers' slop. Nevertheless, to the inexperienced palate of the maiden, it tasted like *Lachrymæ Christi*. She felt the fumes rise to her head. She was eager to reciprocate. She rummaged among the rhetorical figures of her memory.

"What a pretty thing to put on a post-card!"

Coffee and cakes came to interrupt the budding idyll.

What a night was that! One would have said that the angel of happiness had spread his glittering wings over that sad household. Zilda beheld before her very eyes the realisation of all the passionate novels she had ever devoured. Donna Izaura had visions of marrying her off to a wealthy magnate. Moreira dreamed that his debts were all paid and that a handsome surplus jingled in his pockets. And Zico, picturing himself transformed into a merchant, spent the entire night in dreamland, selling goods on trust to Tudinha's people, until the man, won over by such magnanimity, conceded him his daughter.

Only Trancoso slept like a rock, unvisited by dream or nightmare. It's great to be rich!

The next day he visited the rest of the estate—the coffee plantation and the pastures; he informed himself about the methods of breeding and the modern improvements. And as the enthusiasm of the excellent young man continued, Moreira, who had decided the previous evening to ask forty *contos* for the "Corn Stalk," thought it would be a good idea to raise the price. After the scene of the garlic shoot, he made up his mind to ask forty-five; at the end of the examination of the cattle he had raised the figure to fifty; on the way back from the coffee plantation he went up to sixty. When at last the great question arrived, the old fellow replied in a firm voice:

"Seventy-five," and he awaited the answer, ready for a storm of objection.

To his surprise, however, Trancoso found the price reasonable.

"Why, that's not bad at all," he replied. "It's a lower figure than I had expected."

The old codger bit his lip and tried to remedy his error.

"Seventy-five, yes, but . . . not including the cattle."

"Oh, certainly," responded Trancoso.

". . . nor the pigs, either."

"Of course."

". . . nor the furniture."

"Quite natural."



The farmer gasped; there was nothing more to exclude. He called himself a stupid ass. Why hadn't he asked eighty?

His wife, apprised of the situation, called him an idiot.

"But, woman, even forty would have been a fortune!"

"Then eighty would have been twice as good. Don't make excuses. I never yet saw a Moreira who wasn't a blockhead. It's in the blood. You're not to blame."

For a moment they were both sullen, but the cloud of their ill-humour was dispelled by their eagerness to build castles in the air with this unexpected windfall.

Zico took advantage of the favourable gale to clinch the promise of the three *contos* that he needed for establishing his business.

Donna Izaura changed her mind about their new home. She had thought of another one now—on the street through which all the religious processions passed; Eusebio Leite's house.

"But that costs twelve *contos*," protested the husband.

"Yes, but it's much better than that other hovel. Well laid out. The only thing I don't like about it is the bedroom, so close to the roof. Too dark."

"We can put in a skylight."

"Then the garden needs repairs. Instead of the poultry-yard . . ."

Into the wee small hours, they were busy restoring the house, painting it, transforming it into the most delightful of city residences. As they were drowsily putting the finishing touches to the job, Zico knocked at the door.

"Three *contos* won't be enough, father; I must have five. I forgot to count the taxes, and the rent and other little things. . . ."

The father, between two yawns, generously conceded six.

And Zilda? She was sailing the high seas of a fairy-tale.

Let her sail on.

The day when the genial prospective purchaser had to leave came at last. Trancoso said his farewells. He was indeed sorry that he could not prolong so delightful a stay, but important matters demanded his presence elsewhere. The life of a capitalist is not so ideal as it seems. . . . The proposition was as good as settled; he would give his definite answer within a week.

So he left, taking with him a package of eggs—he liked the breed of hens they raised there very much. And a little sack of *carás*—a tidbit of which he was gluttonously fond.

He took, in addition, an excellent souvenir: Rosilho, Moreira's roan, the best horse on the farm. He had praised the animal so highly during their rides that the proprietor had felt in honour bound to refuse to sell; instead he presented the horse to him.

"You see," said Moreira, summing up the general opinion, "a



very wealthy young man; upright; as learned as a university graduate, and yet amiable, well-bred, not turning up his nose like the trash that has been coming here. Breeding will show!"

The old lady was most pleased by his lack of formality. To take eggs and *carás* away with him! How democratic!

They all agreed upon the fellow's merits, each praising him after his own fashion. And thus, even after he had left, the wealthy young man filled the thoughts of the household for a whole week.

But the week passed without bringing the eagerly awaited reply. Then another. And still another. Moreira, a little worried, wrote to him. No reply. He recalled a friend who lived in the same city, and sent him a letter requesting him to ask the capitalist for his definite decision. As for the price, he would come down a trifle. He would let the farm go at fifty-five, at fifty, even forty, including the cattle and the furniture.

His friend replied without delay. As the envelope was torn open, the four hearts beat violently; that paper contained their common fate.

The letter read:

"Dear Moreira:

"Either I am much mistaken or you have been taken in. There isn't any capitalist hereabouts by the name of Trancoso Carvalhaes. There is a Trancosinho, the son of Mrs. Veva, better known as Sacatrapos. He's a scamp who lives by his wits and deceives folks who don't know him. Not long ago he travelled through the state of Minas, from one farm to another, under various pretexts. At times he's a prospective purchaser; he spends a week at the home of the owner, wearing him out with walks and rides looking over the property. He eats and drinks of the very best, makes love to the servants, the daughter of the house, or whomever else he finds—he's a rare article!—and then, when everything is just about settled, he skips out. He's done this a hundred times, always changing the scene of his activities. The rascal likes a change of diet. As this is the only Trancoso around here, I won't bother transmitting your offer. Imagine that good-for-nothing buying a farm!"

Moreira collapsed into a chair, utterly crushed, the letter dropping from his fingers. Then the blood rushed to his face and his eyes blazed.

"The dirty dog!"

The four hopes of the household came tumbling down with a crash, amidst the tears of the daughter, the fury of the mother and the rage of the two men. Zico declared that he would set out at once in search of the rascal and smash his face for him.



"Patience, my boy. The world goes round. One fine day I'll come across the thief, and then I'll square accounts."

Poor air castles! The beautiful châteaux of Spain, reared during a month of miraculous wealth were transformed into gloomy, abandoned ruins. Donna Izaura mourned her cakes, her butter, her pullets. As for Zilda, the disaster was like a hurricane roaring through a flourishing garden. She took to bed with a fever. Her face grew thin. All the tragic passages of the novels she had devoured passed before her mind's eye; in every instance she was the victim. There were days when she thought of suicide. In the end she became accustomed to the idea and she continued to live. She thus had the opportunity of discovering that this business of dying for love occurs only in romantic fiction.

This is the end of the tale—for the parquet; for the gallery there is a little more. Orchestra patrons are accustomed to be content with a few clever, amusing touches in good taste. They come into the theatre after the play has begun, and leave before the epilogue. The gallery, however, wants the show complete, so that they may get their money's worth down to the last cent. In novels and tales they demand the definite solution of the plot. They want to know, and rightly, too, whether So-and-so died, whether the girl got married and lived happily ever after, whether the man sold the estate at last, and for how much.

A sound, human curiosity, worthy of all respect.

Did poor Moreira sell his farm?

It hurts me to confess that he didn't. And his failure to sell it came about in the most inconceivable manner that the devil ever concocted. The devil, of course. For who else is capable of snarling the thread of the skein with so many loops and blind knots just when the knitting is approaching its happy completion?

Fortune willed that that rascal, Trancosinho, should win fifty *contos* in the lottery. Don't laugh. Why shouldn't it have been Trancoso, since Luck is blind—and he had the right number in his pocket? He won the fifty *contos*—a sum which was the height of affluence for a pauper like him.

It took him weeks to get over his stupefaction. Then he decided to become a landed proprietor. He would stop gossip by realising a project that had never occurred to him in the wildest flights of his imagination: he would buy a farm.

He ran mentally over the list of all he had visited during the years of his wanderings, and finally settled upon the Corn Stalk. The determining factor was, above all, the recollection of the girl and the old lady's cakes. He planned to entrust the management to his father-in-law, and live a life of ease, lulled by Zilda's love and his mother-in-law's culinary accomplishments.



So he wrote to Moreira announcing his return for the purpose of closing the deal.

When that letter reached the Corn Stalk, there were roars of rage mingled with howls of vengeance.

"The day of reckoning has come!" cried the old man. "The scoundrel liked the feast and is coming back for more. But this time I'll spoil his appetite, see if I don't!" he concluded, rubbing his palms in foretaste of vengeance.

A flash of hope passed over Zilda's worn heart. The dark night in her soul was lighted by the moonbeam of a "Who can tell?" But she did not dare say a word for fear of her father and brother, who were plotting a terrible settlement. She hoped for a miracle. She lighted another candle to Saint Anthony.

The great day arrived. Trancoso burst in upon the estate mounted upon Rosilho, whom he set a-prancing. Moreira came out to welcome him, his arms behind his back. Before dropping his reins the amiable rogue burst into effusive greetings:

"My dear, dear Moreira! At last the day has come. I am ready to take over your estate at once."

Moreira was all a-quiver. He waited for the knave to dismount. No sooner had Trancoso released the reins and come toward him, all smiles, with open arms, than the old man drew from under his coat a cat-o'-nine-tails and fell upon him with ungodly zeal.

"So you want a farm, do you? Here, here's your farm. Thief!" and slash, slash fell the whip tails.

The poor young man, dazed by this unexpected attack, rushed to his horse and threw himself blindly on it, while Zico sailed into him with all the vigorous resentment of a brother-in-law-that-might-have-been.

Donna Izaura set the dogs upon him:

"Dig your teeth into him, Brinquinho! Chew him up, Joli!"

The ill-fated farm magnate, cornered like a fox, dug the spurs into his horse and fled beneath a shower of insults—and stones. As he cleared the gateway, he could make out, amidst the shouting, the shrieking taunts of the old lady:

"Cake-gobbler! Butter-glutton! You're welcome to them. This is your last trick, egg-robber, yam thief!"

And Zilda?

Behind the window, her eyes burned out with weeping, the sad lass saw the gallant cavalier of her golden dream disappear forever in clouds of dust.

And thus the unlucky Moreira lost the one good stroke of business that Fortune was ever to offer him: The double riddance of his daughter and of the Corn Stalk.